

U-M president plans to leave



ROBBEN W. FLEMING

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News Staff Writer

ANN ARBOR — Robben W. Fleming plans to leave the University of Michigan presidency at the end of the current academic year, The Detroit News has learned.

Fleming has planned to announce his resignation at the U. of M. Board of Regents' first meeting of the school year, Thursday and Friday.

Fleming, 61, refused to confirm or deny that his resignation is imminent. He said in an interview Friday: "I'm certainly going to say something on that one of these days. It's no secret that I've said over the years — and meant it — that I did not expect to stay in this position until retirement."

SEVERAL U. of M. regents, reached by The News, said they were unaware of Fleming's plans but added they would not be surprised if he decided to accept some other post since he has been in demand by other organizations for a decade.

Fleming, now beginning his 11th year as president of the 46,000-student university, has frequently said that "fresh ideas" are necessary, that a person who remains in such a job longer than 10 years could possibly outlive his effectiveness. Practical considerations persuaded him to stay the 11th year. "The university has a pension scheme that, strangely enough, makes one eligible at 62," said Fleming, who will turn 62 in December.

A law professor with a national reputation as a labor mediator and arbitrator and a former chancellor at the University of Wisconsin, Fleming receives three or four job offers annually and is in excellent health. In the interview Friday he talked freely about his options, though he said he does not know what he will do next.

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By end of school year

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"I really haven't forced myself to narrow them down, but there are a number of possibilities..."

THEY INCLUDE teaching law either at U. of M. or another university, doing arbitration work, entering government service or becoming president of a major foundation. At least four — Ford, Sloan-Kettering, Russell Sage and the Carnegie Fund for the Advancement of Teaching (of which Fleming is board chairman) — are currently looking for presidents, he said. He has repeatedly ruled out accepting the presidency of another university.

Stability has been the hallmark of Fleming's administration and, by giving the regents a full year to choose his successor, he hopes to avoid the instability that interim presidencies often produce.

Several U. of M. regents interviewed by The News on Friday said they would be disappointed if Fleming resigns. But they would not be surprised because of the constant demand for Fleming's services by other groups almost since he came to Ann Arbor in 1968.

"We expect President Fleming to be around for some time," said regent Robert E. Nederlander of Birmingham. "I haven't heard anything about it... I think he would tell his board. As far as I know, he's staying at the university."

Regent Thomas Roach of Detroit agreed, adding, "You're just a little bit ahead of us."

HE SAID most of the regents have studied the search committee procedures used in 1967 when Harlan Hatcher retired as U. of M.'s eighth president in its then 150-year history. "I think we would follow very closely that pattern" in designating a successor to Fleming.

The board at that time appointed four separate presidential selection subcommittees, one each of faculty, alumni, students and the regents themselves. Each submitted recommendations in rank order to the full board which, after several months, unanimously named Fleming to the post.

He was in the original list of candidates selected by the faculty, but was subsequently praised by all four groups.

Fleming guided the university through the turbulent years of student radicalism, remaining a highly respected president, popular with the regents, alumni, faculty, staff, state legislators and, in recent years, the students. He also is a skillful fund raise and "ambassador of goodwill."

That combination is essential in the person who will lead the university into the next decade, said history professor Shaw Livermore, president of the U. of M. Senate Assembly, the faculty governing body.

PUBLIC SUPPORT for universities is eroding at a time when the pool of college-age youths is declining, portending a real crisis for the university in the 1980's, he said.

"I'm really quite serious when I say it will take an absolute genius," Livermore declared. "U. of M. is thought to be the 'big boy on the block' and, understandably, there's a good deal of jealousy. There will be a demand to share equally in the (enrollment and funding) decline with other state colleges... It might not make educational sense but there's a feeling that everybody ought to suffer equally."

Because of that, he said, a very strong argument can be made for giving priority to a politician-type candidate who "gets on well" with legislators, alumni and the public. But at the same time, Livermore emphasized, the new president must be both a strong administrator and academician.

Harold Shapiro, U. of M.'s 43-year-old vice-president for academic affairs, is frequently mentioned as a possible successor to Fleming, a half dozen highly ranked campus administration sources have told The News. Fleming himself has told friends that Shapiro is a prime candidate for the presidency of a major university.

But at the end of this school year, Shapiro will have been in his present position only two years, making his selection a longshot, the sources noted. Still, Shapiro's rise through the university ranks has been meteoric. A graduate of Princeton University, he joined the U. of M. faculty in 1964 as an assistant professor of economics and has been promoted nearly every three years. He was chairman of the economics department when he was appointed to his present position, which ranks just under Fleming in the university hierarchy.

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